DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 459 610 FL 026 994

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TITLE	A Comparison of Students' Beliefs towards Foreign Language Acquisition in Mexico and the United States.
PUB DATE	1998-00-00
NOTE	17p.; Contains cropped text.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS	College Students; Comparative Analysis; English (Second Language); Foreign Countries; *High Risk Students; Higher Education; Questionnaires; Second Language Instruction; Second Language Learning; *Student Attitudes; Student Surveys; Teacher Surveys
IDENTIFIERS	*Mexico; United States

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the language learning beliefs of beginning-level English as a foreign language (EFL) students in a Mexican university, part of a larger study to find out why so many Mexican EFL at-risk academic learners fail. The at-risk learners beliefs about foreign language learning are compared with those of English proficient beginning level Mexican university students and also with those of beginning foreign language students in the United States. It is stressed that pre-conceived notions about language learning can affect learners' ability in the classroom. Students who think second language learning mainly involves learning grammar will spend most of their energy on learning grammar, while older learners may believe that younger learners have a special ability and have negative expectations about their chances for success. This paper reports on the results of attitude research of three groups: one group of basic foreign language learners in the United States, and two beginning Mexican foreign language learners--one group of proficient EFL learners and one group of at-risk students. (KFT)

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INTRODUCTION

Most people have beliefs and opinions about how languages are learned. Discussions about the best techniques or schools for learning a foreign language, the "right" age to begin to study and the nature of the learning process are topics for coffee breaks or popular magazine articles. Some people believe that languages can be obtained easily (obvious from the innumerable approaches which promise "quick" learning) while others who have attempted to learn a foreign language may take the opposite viewpoint.

As language teachers, we should be aware of how pre-conceived opinions about language learning can affect the learners' ability in the classroom. Students who think that learning a second language mainly involves learning grammar will spend most of their energy on understanding the grammar, while older adults who believe that younger learners have a "special" ability may begin the language learning experience with negative expectations about their chances for success. Unsuccessful encounters could make learners believe that to acquire a foreign language they must possess those "special" capabilities which they do not have, thus, leading them to believe that they are doomed to failure for all their lives.

This paper will report on the results of attitude research with three groups: One group of basic Foreign Language (FL) learners in the United States and two of beginning Mexican university English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. The two groups of Mexican students consisted of one group of proficient EFL learners and one of academic at-risk students. In order to identify the Mexican learners' beliefs about the language learning process, an attitude and belief instrument was administered to both groups. This paper will report on the results of that instrument with the 2 groups of Mexican students and compare the results with those of a published study (Horwitz,

instrument. The results represent only a portion of the author's CONACYT (Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología) funded project of which the ultimate goal is to identify specific reasons for Mexican EFL university academic-at-risk students' language learning problems.

THE AT-RISK LEARNERS

The author's definition of at-risk students that this paper and the CONACYT project uses is "those EFL learners who are having academic problems in their English classes and are considered by their teachers to be at-risk of failing the English course but who are not experiencing academic problems in their other university courses". These students were initially identified by their EFL teachers based on a history of previous English problems and through a listening comprehension screening test.

The skill of listening was chosen as a factor to identify the problem learner because of the communicative approach which is used in their university EFL courses. At-risk students who are placed in the beginning levels normally come from schools where their English teachers did not speak the language and tended to center their classes around translation activities, conjugation of verbs and memorization of rules. When they arrive at the university, they are suddenly immersed in English classes where the teacher only speaks in the target language, uses audio tapes daily and is continually evaluating their listening and speaking skills. The classes do not focus on grammar as did their previous English courses, instead the students are expected to actively use the foreign language. Many of the students referred to the study were in the last semesters of their majors after having experienced repeated failures in their university EFL courses. In other words, the identified at-risk learners were caught in a cycle of EFL failures.

BELIEFS AND ATTITUDES

Most language teachers can relate to how students' preconceived beliefs concerning the language learning process can influence a learners progress in the classroom. If students feel strongly about how the language should be learned or they believe that their chances for success are slim because they have passed the optimum age, they may begin the process with preconceived notions which could influence their learning experiences. Wenden (1991) discusses how these learners' beliefs concerning their part in the process of language learning influence the degree of success they will experience. If they believe that they have no aptitude to learn languages or that language must be learned in a certain way, this will influence their attitudes towards

their capacity or role in the process. For example, students who have been told that repetition or that memorizing vocabulary is important to learn the L2 will spend more time in that activity. She mentions that students' beliefs also influence the language learning strategies they choose to use or not to use.

Holec (1987) states that language learners should go through "deconditioning" to change their preconceived ideas or prejudices which could interfere with the language learning process. This "deconditioning" could be achieved by introducing some commonly preconceived notions for class discussion, such as "Spelling is one of the major difficulties in learning French" (p. 145).

Mantle-Bromley (1995) mentions in her study that teachers should be aware that some learners come to the classroom with attitudes, expectations and beliefs that could prove harmful to their learning process. She also found that it was possible to aid the learners in overcoming their preconceived notions which were blocking their performance in the foreign language. Based on her study she recommends that teachers "design and implement lessons on the language-learning process that incorporate attitude-change methods" (p. 383). Following such lessons, studies should then be conducted to determine the extent that the beliefs were altered.

Even though teachers and researchers understand the importance of student preconceived beliefs, very little formal research has been done in the area. Findings by Horwitz (1988) in a study to identify the beliefs held by foreign language students confirmed that learners arrive to the situation with a variety of feelings about how learning should occur. In order for the learners to maximize the benefits of the FL experience, the teachers should be aware of students' attitudes and how they relate to the particular teaching methodology being employed. She also mentions that the students' preconceived convictions also affect how they approach a learning task and that it is the responsibility of the teacher to help students overcome their misconceptions so they can become effective language learners.

PARTICIPANTS

The Mexican subjects in the study consisted of 68 beginning level EFL academic-at-risk learners identified by their instructors as having serious problems with the skill of listening comprehension. At the beginning of the semester they completed four questionnaires to evaluate 1) motivation to

learn the target language, 2) the amount of communicative anxiety they experience in the language classroom, 3) the listening strategies they were presently employing and 4) individual beliefs about the nature of language learning process. These four factors were chosen to be evaluated because they are most often mentioned in literature as possible reasons for language learning failures. An equal number of proficient Mexican language learners in the beginners level completed the same instruments. This paper will report only on the results of the fourth instrument to ascertain their language learning beliefs.

The participants in the beliefs study conducted in the United States were 241 first semester foreign language (French, German and Spanish) students at the University of Texas. The beliefs instrument was applied during the first weeks of the semester and the results were published by Elaine Horwitz in 1988. All the U.S. subjects were taking foreign languages to meet the University requirement as were the EFL participants in Mexico.

INSTRUMENT

In order to assess the students' opinions about how languages are learned, an instrument developed by Elaine Horwitz (1988) was used. Since its development, the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) has been employed in various published studies. The original instrument contained 34 items to assess student beliefs in five major areas: difficulty of language learning (#1-4 on the instrument used in this study); foreign language aptitude (#5-8); the nature of the process of language learning (#9-12); learning and communication strategies (#13-16); and motivations and expectations. The "motivation and expectations" sub-section was not included since the subjects were completing another instrument to evaluate this area.

For the Mexican students, the BALLI was translated into Spanish and shortened to only 16 items assessing four of the major areas. The choice of the items was decided based on the researcher's experience with Mexican university EFL learners as being the areas which needed the most exploration. The United States study used all of the original 34 items, but this paper will report on only the results of the 16 used in the Mexican study. One important change that was made to the instrument was changing some of the terms "foreign language" in the statements to "English" for the Mexican students. For example in item #2, the original statement read, "The foreign language I am trying to learn is very difficult". It was changed to "English is very

difficult to learn". Readers should keep this in mind when analyzing the results of the three groups for each question (See Appendixes I-IV).

There were no "correct" nor "incorrect" answers to the statements since they were designed to evoke beliefs and opinions. The results of the BALLI are reported in terms of percentages which have been rounded to the nearest whole number. The BALLI is a Likert scaled, self-report instrument in which the students choose the number which most closely represents their opinions. The choices are scaled from #1 being "strongly agree" to #5 which is "strongly disagree".

As a final note, it is important to understand that the BALLI is designed to gather descriptive data. The results in the two cultures should not be used to statistically compare the groups but to explore tendencies in foreign language students beliefs and expectations that could influence their FL achievement.

DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS BY SECTIONS OF THE BALLI

The Difficulty of Language Learning (See App. I)

Items 1-4 concerned the students' opinions about the general difficulty of learning a foreign language and their feelings about the specific difficulty of skills in learning English. Both the at-risk group and the proficient learners showed support in question #1 for the concept that there is a hierarchy of difficulty depending on the language the student is studying. The North Americans also supported the assumption even though less chose the "strongly agree" option. However, when answering #2, the proficient learners and at-risk learners differed. The majority of at-risk students felt that English is a difficult language to learn while the proficient group reported the opposite. This can be interpreted to mean that because the proficient learners have experienced few problems in the acquisition of English, they did not feel that English is especially difficult. The United States study revealed that only 32% agreed with the statement about the foreign language they were learning while the majority felt neutral about its level of difficulty.

Items #3 and #4 dealt with student opinions about the relative difficulty of the four skills in English. The at-risk group reported that reading and writing were easier for them than speaking and understanding which are the two skills they were originally identified as needing help with. The

reading and writing. This is probably due to the fact that they had reached a better oral communicative proficiency and were striving to improve their writing skills. The North American students tended to respond more like the at-risk group than the proficient Mexican learners. One possible explanation for this could be because the United States students had not previously been exposed to the foreign language they were studying and, thus, were closer to the profile of the at-risk.

Foreign Language Aptitude (See App. II)

Statements #5-8 evaluated the students' beliefs of the possibility of specialized abilities for language learning and the attributes of successful and unsuccessful language students. An overwhelming majority of all the groups agreed with the belief that children can learn languages easier than adults. The Mexican groups also agreed to the belief that there are people who have a "special" ability to learn languages with only a small percentage disagreeing with these "folk" concepts. The North American students, however, did not concur as strongly with statement #6 with only 50% agreeing, 27% being neutral and 22% disagreeing.

Few subjects (26% of the at-risk population, 16% of the proficient learners and 5% of the subjects in the U.S. study) endorsed the statement that students who are good at math are not good in languages. Item #8 was included in the instrument to evaluate if the EFL learners thought that native English speakers had a better language learning ability than they did, but the resuits showed than Mexican learners definitely were not in agreement with the statement that North Americans can learn a FL easier than they. The responses of the students in the United States study also revealed that they did not consider that the people of the United States possessed any special gift for language learning.

The researcher considered items #5-8 as important ones to assess especially for the at-risk group since the self-concept of language aptitude can be a source of negative expectations. When learners assume that they are not able or lack the capacity to learn a foreign language, they will probably do poorly in the FL class.

The Nature of Language Learning (See App. III)

Statements #9-12 included issues related to the nature of the process of learning a foreign language. Item #9 checked if the students viewed language learning as different from other subjects and learning tasks. From

their responses, it was evident that all three groups felt that the language class is different from other school subjects. In fact, the at-risk EFL students' opinion (86%) is stronger than that of the proficient learners and surpassed the students in the U.S. study by 5%. This is probably due to the multiple failures that members of the at-risk group have suffered in their EFL classes even though they have been able to achieve in their other subjects.

Items #10 and #11 dealt with the common belief that language learning is merely a matter of memorizing grammar rules and learning new vocabulary words. The at-risk students shared some of these opinions about the learning process but the proficient group tended to disagree. In item #10, forty-four percent of the at-risk group agreed as opposed to 25% of the proficient Mexican students and 34% in the North American study. Likewise in item #11, fifty-three percent of the at-risk learners agreed in contrast to 33% of the proficient students and 28% of the U.S. study who agreed. A strong belief that learning grammar rules and vocabulary words is more important will likely lead students to spend most of their EFL study time in memorizing lists and rules instead of taking advantage of the communicative learning tasks the teacher is providing.

In the results for statement #12, both Mexican and North American students agreed that it is better to study a language in the country where it is spoken, however, 30% of the at-risk, 33% of the proficient and 27% of the U.S. students disagreed. These learners viewed their chances to learn the foreign language in their country in a more positive light.

Learning and Communication Strategies (See App. IV)

The last area of the BALLI addressed the students' opinions concerning learning strategies. The opinions in their answers to item #13 reflected the importance the Mexican learners gave to the skill of good pronunciation. Eighty-four percent of the at-risk and 100% of the proficient learners agreed to the importance of speaking the foreign language with an "excellent" accent as compared with only 50% of the North American students. Pronunciation is an area which is not usually represented in language texts and many Mexican EFL teachers do not feel they are qualified nor have the time to include it in what is normally an already "packed" course plan. We, as language teachers, tend to overlook the importance of pronunciation activities, but, by doing so, are leaving out a very motivating aspect of student preparation.

In reference to traditional learning strategies, the students (81% of the at-risk, 75% of the proficient and 99% of the U.S. study) also endorsed the importance of repeating and practicing English. This indicates the usefulness this technique has in the eyes of students. Since it is one which is not emphasized in current methodology, the EFL teacher should make a point of explaining to the learners why it is not stressed in their classroom activities.

Item #15 reflects one of the major problems that Mexican EFL teachers have with their learners, that of getting them to speak in English in class. Eighty percent of the at-risk students felt strongly self-conscious when speaking in comparison to 50% of the proficient learners and 51% of the North Americans. Only 12% of the at-risk disagreed while 33% of the proficient group and 26% of the U.S. students disagreed indicating that the proficient and North American students felt more secure in the skill but still not totally.

Curiously, it was the at-risk group who agreed slightly (83%) less than the proficient group in their responses to item #16. The proficient learners overwhelmingly supported (91%) the statement that teachers should not allow them to make mistakes when beginning to learn the language. However, this belief was strongly agreed to by both groups. Again, this should indicate to language teachers that students need to be "reprogrammed" concerning certain language learning attitudes when beginning the study of languages . The North American students revealed a 53% agreement to the statement which is significantly less than those of Mexican EFL students.

DISCUSSION

The data in this study showed some significant differences between the three groups. In the first section which assessed the difficulty of learning a language, the at-risk obviously felt that English was "very difficult to learn" (item #2) because they had experienced problems and many had failed in previous EFL attempts while the proficient students rated the level of difficulty of English quite low since they had achieved success in their EFL classes. In the responses for items #3-4, the at-risk group reported having difficulty with all four skills while the proficient students responded differently.

In the second section which dealt with the students' opinions concerning FL aptitudes, the students in the three groups reported believing that children learned easier than adults. Also, in item #6 a great majority of the two Mexican groups also believed the myth about the "special language ability"

Those students who accept these notions as true may find them easy excuses for not being successful in the FL attempt. These results indicate that teachers should include an open discussion about these common misconceptions during the first days of class.

In the third section, even though the majority did not agree that vocabulary and grammar should be the main emphasis in their language instruction, there were still large percentages that felt they were important. This signifies that teachers need to explain why the methodology they are using emphasizes student acquisition through use of the FL as opposed to an overt learning of the language.

The fourth section concerning learning and communication strategies presents three interesting findings. The Mexican students overwhelmingly agreed to the importance of speaking English with an "excellent" accent, of the value of practice drills and repetition and to the significance of immediate correction when they make a mistake. The fact that beginning students want to speak with an "excellent" accent may provide an insight to why they insist on speaking in Spanish in the English class instead of English. They are ashamed of their accents and do not want to seem foolish to their peers. These students have not understood that through using the language and self-monitoring and evaluating their progress they can achieve better pronunciation. Also, they need to be made aware of the reasons why the teacher does not oblige the class to repeat nor correct every error at the time it occurs. These points which seem obvious to English teachers are not obvious to EFL learners and need to be included in the "deconditioning" program to which Holec (1987) referred.

In general, the similarity of beliefs between the three groups is an important finding of the survey reported here. Although many of the items had slightly different percentages, the overall pattern except for those mentioned above, was similar. This agreement would indicate that these results represent the opinions and beliefs of many university FL students in different countries.

CONCLUSION

This report has attempted to provide insights into the beliefs held by three groups of beginning level university foreign language students. However, these results present only a small portion of what is the study of student beliefs. Perhaps if the Mexican study had included all 34 items from the

original BALLI, the researcher would have been able to ascertain a wider range of beliefs and attitudes.

The role of anxiety in the FL classroom is another factor which must not be ignored. For students who believe that language learning is a phenomenon which occurs under certain conditions (such as memorizing), these factors will influence their in and out-of-class study habits. If the methodology that the teacher is employing does not agree with those of the beliefs and expectations of the students, then the learners may experience debilitating anxiety in the language class which will result in lowered motivation, procrastination in doing homework/studying or avoidance of speaking and listening tasks in the FL class (Macintyre, 1995).

Also, the extent to which learner beliefs vary between proficiency levels and cultures still needs to be explored further. Even though this paper represents only a preliminary inquiry into EFL students' beliefs and attitudes about how foreign language learning ought to take place, it still provides valuable information for language teachers who should not ignore its practical implications in the classroom.

It is hoped that the results of this comparative study will help EFL teachers in Mexico understand that the factor of student beliefs about the language learning process must not be ignored. Beliefs influence how learners approach their learning tasks and if the teachers can help prepare students to identify and eventually modify their beliefs, they will be more effective in their learning.

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Appendix I

BALLI Results

Difficulty of Language Learning Section

	strongly agree 1	agree 2	neutral 3	disagree 4	strongly disagree 5
1. Some languages are easier to learn than others.					
AT-RISK	58	28	2	10	2
PROFICIENT	83	17	0	0	0
U.S. STUDY	36	51	10	2	1
2. English is very difficult to learn.					
AT-RISK	16	54	4	16	10
PROFICIENT	0	17	0	25	58
U.S. STUDY	2	30	57	8	2
3. It is easier to speak than understand spoken English.					
AT-RISK	10	24	14	37	16
PROFICIENT	0	8	17	58	17
U.S. STUDY	5	19	13	48	14
4. It is easier to read and write in English than speak and understand it.					
AT-RISK	32	38	11	14	4
PROFICIENT	8	25	0	42	25
U.S. STUDY	15	43	23	16	2

Appendix II

BALLI Results
Foreign Language Aptitude Section

	strongly agree 1	agree 2	neutral 3	disagree 4	strongly disagree 5
5. It is easier for a child to learn a foreign language than for an adult.					
AT-RISK	50	30	13	4	4
PROFICIENT	67	17	0	17	0
U.S. STUDY	45	38	10	6	1
6. Some people are born with a special ability to learn languages.					
AT-RISK	78	12	4	4	2
PROFICIENT	58	33	0	8	0
U.S. STUDY	13	37	27	16	6
7. People who are good at math and science are not good in learning foreign languages.					
AT-RISK	16	10	14	39	26
PROFICIENT	8	8	33	17	33
U.S. STUDY	2	3	36	33	24
8. People from the United States are good at learning foreign languages.					
AT-RISK	0	20	48	21	13
PROFICIENT	0	8	42	33	17
U.S. STUDY	0	4	57	26	10

Appendix III

BALLI Results

Nature of the Process of L.L. Section

	strongly agree 1	agree 2	neutral 3	disagree 4	strongly disagree 5
9. Learning a foreign language is different from learning other school subjects.					
AT-RISK	54	32	6	2	6
PROFICIENT	50	17	0	33	0
U.S. STUDY	30	51	8	8	1
10. Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of new vocabulary words.					
AT-RISK	6	38	6	40	15
PROFICIENT	8	17	8	50	17
U.S. STUDY	7	27	18	44	4
11. Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of grammar rules.					
AT-RISK	17	36	10	26	13
PROFICIENT	0	33	8	33	25
U.S. STUDY	5	23	34	31	6
12. It is better to learn a foreign language in the country where the language is spoken.					
AT-RISK	22	44	4	14	16
PROFICIENT	25	42	0	25	8
U.S. STUDY	33	38	19	8	1

Appendix IV

BALLI Results

Learning &Communication Strategies Section

	strongly agree 1	agree 2	neutral 3	disagree 4	strongly disagree 5
13. It is important to speak English with an excellent accent.					
AT-RISK	44	40	4	13	0
PROFICIENT	42	58	0	0	0
U.S. STUDY	13	37	28	19	2
14. To learn a foreign language it is important to repeat it a lot.					
AT-RISK	54	27	19	0	0
PROFICIENT	42	33	17	8	0
U.S. STUDY	66	32	0	0	0
15. I feel self-conscious speaking English in front of other people.					
AT-RISK	38	42	8	8	4
PROFICIENT	17	33	17	8	25
U.S. STUDY	13	38	21	21	5
16. If I am allowed to make mistakes when I begin to learn English, it will be hard to get rid of them later on.					
AT-RISK	57	26	0	11	6
PROFICIENT	83	8	8	0	0
U.S. STUDY	19	34	18	19	9